

The Political Assassination of My Great Grand-Uncle, Yousef El Sebai



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(alternative name transliterations include Yusuf Al Sibai, Yusuf Siba'i, Youssef El Sebai, and Youssef Al Sebai)

On the morning of February 18th, 1978, renowned Egyptian author and politician Yousef El Sebai was murdered by terrorists. His death was the opening to an attack that would have a major impact on Egyptian international relations. I did research and interviewed my grandmother, Doctor Abla Sherif, the niece of El Sebai, to better understand my family history and the namesake of my brother.



Yousef El Sebai ([Image Source](#))

The Israeli-Palestinian Problem

As you've probably heard a million times from the media in these final months of 2023, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a complicated issue going back decades. It becomes a lot more relevant when they're your neighbors. I asked my grandmother to recount the Egyptian consensus on the issue back in the 1970's. She recalls that they were largely sympathetic to the Palestinians, feeling like they were getting the rotten end of the deal, and said her uncle was also "a defender of Palestinian rights".

There were no easy solutions. The situation had gone too long and far too deep. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, who held office for the majority of that decade, thought that at this point, the best realistic outcome for Palestine was a two-state solution. He worked to establish diplomatic ties with Israel and attempted to lay the groundwork for peace between them and the Arab world as a whole (Sayegh 3). El Sebai was a good friend of Sadat, and agreed with his ideals. This was what would make him a target (Albin 16) ("Palestinian Terror") ("Egyptians Denounce Palestinians").

The Day of

He was at a Hilton hotel in Nicosia, Cyprus the day of his assassination, attending a conference as the secretary general of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization. He briefly stepped outside of the conference room, only to be shot and killed by the arriving terrorists. The conference was stormed immediately after, and hostages of many backgrounds were taken, even including members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Dimitrakis 95).

The perpetrators were Palestinian extremists who were against Anwar Sadat's plans, saying he was "betraying" their people. Using the hostages, they eventually negotiated their way to an airplane. This is where the situation started to escalate into a diplomatic and political mess of impulsive decisions that I struggle to follow. What I basically grasp is that Egypt sought to get involved in the situation with their own anti-terrorist forces, without the permission of the Cyprian government first, who were already working on the hostage crisis. This resulted in the two anti-terrorist forces fighting each other. Egyptian relations with Cyprus were soured and destroyed for years (Dimitrakis 95) (Benjamin 2) (Randal 2) (Hodson, Tordoff, and Robin 164).

The Legacy of Yousef El Sebai

When my grandmother first received the news, she was no longer living in Egypt. By this point in her life, she had immigrated to Canada and was raising her family. She remembers being contacted about his death by an Egyptian ambassador she was old friends with. She and her uncle were close, and the news was a shock. It had a big impact on the family, especially so on

his grieving wife, Dowlet, and daughter, Besa (note: I'm unaware of their preferred transliterations for their names).

Yousef El Sebai was an accomplished man. He was chairman of the board of the al-Ahram newspaper giant, served as minister of culture and information, and was a successful author. Several of his already popular novels were turned into films (Albin 16). He had a lot of work and influence in the media, which gave further reach to the opinions the extremists disagreed with ("Egyptians Denounce Palestinians").

Here's a list I found of some of his works:

[ET commemorates birth anniversary of legendary Yusuf el-Sebai - EgyptToday](#)

Here's footage from his funeral from the AP News Archive on Youtube:

[News Item \(3c5d7b4d-41e7-7ebf-dcf6-118594597c1a\) - YouTube](#)

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